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From Shared Experience, An Offer of Comfort

A Support Group Helps to Repair Lives Shattered by Plane Crashes

By JUAN FORERO

In the days and weeks after Swissair Flight 111 plunged into the frigid waters off Nova Scotia, Michele Librett said she turned to family and friends, neighbors and an airline support team to make it through a period marked by shock and denial, grinding physical pain and the grim sensation that life couldn't possibly go on.

"They took care of all the things I was unable to focus on," explained Ms. Librett, whose husband of 14 years, Jeffrey, had been among the 229 people killed in the crash on Sept. 2, 1998. "I was so devastated and so in shock, and I was not able to think about all these little details."

A cadre of neighbors dropped by to take out the garbage or pick up her two daughters at school. Another group took covered dishes to her home in Wantagh on Long Island. Two volunteers provided by Delta Airlines, through which Mr. Librett purchased his Swissair ticket, ferried the family to a memorial service. And a Red Cross counselor visited their home.

But two months after the crash, Ms. Librett said, she still felt isolated in her grief and desperate to connect with someone who "understood the shock and full emotion that I was going through."

So she turned to Martha Rhein, a mother of four whose husband of 20 years, C. Kirk Rhein Jr., was 1 of 230 people who died when T.W.A. Flight 800 exploded off Long Island on July 17, 1996.

Ms. Rhein, 46, who lives in Darien, Conn., is among more than 50 people who have volunteered to serve as "grief mentors" through AirCraft Casualty Emotional Support Services, a program that pairs up people who have lost loved ones in air disasters. The organization, which is based in New York and referred to as Access, is one of several recent grass-roots efforts to help people like Ms. Librett find support and solace from others who have experienced the intense grief, shock and denial that come when an airliner goes down.

"I basically knew what she was feeling, that feeling of overwhelming numbness and not knowing how to take those initial baby steps," said Ms. Rhein, who spoke to Ms. Librett several times by phone.

As family members deal with the devastation of EgyptAir Flight 990, which crashed off Nantucket Island two weeks ago, the extreme circumstances of such a calamity are once again fresh in the public consciousness.

Those who have experienced the aftermath of major plane crashes know about exhaustive searches and recovery efforts, and that a cause can remain elusive. They know that bodies are often not recovered, and if they are, that open caskets are out of the question. They know about

the long, agonizing period of grief and the seemingly insatiable public demand for private details. And they agonize wondering whether loved ones suffered.

But those who have lived through the experience also know that there can be hope and rejuvenation, and even happiness. The key for Access volunteers is sharing the range of experiences "on the road of grief," as Ms. Rhein put it, while stressing that life will go on.

Since the 1980's — when the downing of K.A.L. Flight 007 by a Soviet fighter and the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, dominated headlines — relatives of airline crash victims have banded together into potent family associations and embarked on a number of crusades. They have fought for additional airline safety measures, prodded for legislation that would increase the liability of carriers and lobbied airlines and government agencies to provide timely, accurate information to grieving relatives af-

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Pool photo by Jim Bourg

Relatives of those who died in EgyptAir Flight 990 held a memorial service in Newport, R.I.



Steve Derman/The New York Times



Associated Press

Relatives gathered on the Long Beach near where T.W.A. Flight 800 crashed in 1996, while in Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia, those in mourning left a wreath close to where Swissair Flight 111 went down.

R E G I O N

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ter disasters.

It's only natural then, said several organizers of the family associations, that there would be a group of victims' relatives exclusively devoted to providing one-on-one emotional support.

Access was founded in 1996 by Heidi Snow, whose fiancé, Michel Breitstroff, a French hockey player, died in the crash of the Paris-bound T.W.A. 800. The nonprofit group, run by Ms. Snow out of a friend's East Side office, uses an Web site (www.accesshelp.org) to reach mourners. The group's brochure and other materials are also made available to grieving families through the Red Cross, as was the case at the Newport, R.I., hotel that housed the relatives of EgyptAir victims.

Ms. Snow said that Access was born of her own experiences, when she felt she had no one to turn to in the weeks after grieving T.W.A. families went home from the Ramada Plaza Hotel near Kennedy Airport. "When you go home is when it hits you that they're gone and they're not coming back," she said. "That's when I found it so difficult to see that the support is gone."

One of the first to seek help from the group was Lynn Ross, a Manhattan garment merchandiser who lost the man she had lived with for eight years, Joseph LaMotta, 49, in the Swissair crash.

Ms. Ross said that after the disaster, she experienced a hodgepodge of emotions and self-doubt. She could make herself go to work, but she would often break down crying once there. She couldn't listen to music. She couldn't eat. So she contacted Access, and was put in touch with Betty Capasso of Brooklyn.

"You want to speak to someone who's gone through it, in the beginning, someone who can just sit and listen and say, 'I know what you're going through,'" said Ms. Ross, 48. "You ask, Why am I acting this way? Why am I coming home and I don't want to do anything? I can't even write out a check. Is there something wrong with me? And she would say, 'That's exactly what happened to me.'"

Mrs. Capasso understood all too well. A decade before, her son Greg, 21, had been killed in the Pan Am bombing. She could also draw from her experience as a trained counselor, a career she vigorously pursued after Greg's death.

"When my son died, it was the only thing that made sense to me," explained Mrs. Capasso, now director of the Brooklyn Center for Families in Crisis, a mental health clinic. "What I started to find out was that I started to see that I had something to give others who experienced this kind of grief."

The notion of finding support among people with a similar back-



Edward Keating/The New York Times

Lynn Ross was among the first to seek help from a support group, Aircraft Casualty Emotional Support Services, after the man she had lived with for eight years, Joseph LaMotta, died in the Swissair crash.

Hard-earned advice for 'the road of grief.'

ground is, of course, not new. Recovering alcoholics have Alcoholics Anonymous. Parents of children killed by drunken drivers have Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Relatives of victims of violent crime have various self-help groups.

Indeed, some people who have lost loved ones in airline crashes — including those who formed the influential National Air Disaster Alliance — have long offered support on an informal basis, either by arriving at the scene of a crash where mourners tend to congregate or by making phone contact weeks later.

These days, though, some groups are going a step further, organizing structured support services. One group, Wings of Hope in Atlanta, has monthly, two-hour sessions moderated by a grief therapist and attended by people who lost relatives in air disasters. Another, Families of T.W.A. Flight 800, has set up of foundation to raise money for retreats where grieving family members looking for support and companionship will be welcome, said an organizer, John Seaman, of Albany, N.Y., whose niece died aboard Flight 800.

"I think that there's a real altruistic humanitarianism that's going on," said Dr. Eileen Leary, a grief therapist in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., who counsels people who have had

relatives die in airline crashes. "By consoling and comforting other victims, they are doing what they would have done with their own relatives but were not able to do."

Some of the most devout supporters of such efforts even envision the day when they will arrive at crash sites along with crisis-response teams. But that proposition does not sit well with some mental health professionals.

"Simply because someone had an experience doesn't automatically mean that they're going to be prepared to help somebody else," said Dr. Robert Hayes, a psychology professor at Ball State University who has been the mental health officer for the Red Cross at the EgyptAir crash scene. "They could re-traumatize themselves by getting into that. We, even in our own workers, try to watch out and screen people who have had their own personal traumas in recent times."

But Dr. Therese Rando, clinical director of the Institute for the Study and Treatment of Loss in Warwick, R.I., said support groups can be crucial if conducted in the right setting. "They allow a person who has been through it to go back and make a difference and help someone else," said Dr. Rando, "and they allow the person receiving the help to have some opportunity to be consoled, to be understood and to have a model."

At Access, grief mentors say their participation is therapeutic. John Falkin, for instance, lost his father in 1960 when two planes collided in New York. But he said he had never really spoken in depth about that childhood trauma until he talked to Ms. Snow.

He had gone to her office on East 81st Street to volunteer his time and ended up recounting his own story with her.

"This was an epiphany," said Mr. Falkin, now 47. "I felt the weight come off my shoulder, weight I had been carrying for decades."

Ms. Rhein, the mother from Connecticut, said that her initial contact with Ms. Librett was painful as she recalled and spoke about her own hardships. Eventually, she said, the two women found strength in their talks. The message that prevailed, Ms. Rhein said, was that "there is still joy and there is still love, and the world is going around and you can learn to reinvent yourself."

Ms. Librett, now 40, certainly did learn that life went on, though pain and loss are ever-present. She is busy raising her children. She also returned to school, enrolling at Long Island University's Brookville campus to study art education. Ms. Librett said she is even thinking about volunteering for Access.

"It's my turn," she said. "There were people who did it for me."